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ABSTRACT

Changes in the nature of work have resulted in a significant loss of employment opportunities for Australian youths. Since the 1980s, the Australian government's perspective on the problem of youth unemployment has moved from emphasis on job availability to emphasis on individual job readiness. A 1999 Tasmanian study of early school leavers and their attempts to gain employment confirms the disjunction between the world of work and the educational experiences of youths who leave school after completing compulsory education. For the 63 Tasmanian youths studied, the pathway to work was not easy. Many reported negative experiences in their job searches, and many viewed themselves in a no-win situation as welfare officials pressured them to find employment without providing them with any meaningful assistance in doing so. However, the respondents did not perceive all attempts to assist them negatively. Those who participated in short training programs emphasizing generic skills and knowledge in specific areas of work generally considered the programs beneficial. Vocational training programs with no waiting periods were seen as key to easing the Tasmanian youths' transition from school to work. It was recommended that the issues of youth unemployment, forging school-business partnerships, and revising existing curricula be revisited. (Contains 13 references.) (MN)

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EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS: OR TRACKS THAT LEAD NOWHERE?

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Chapter summary

Work as we know it is changing and, as a consequence, so must education. Unfortunately, one of the major aspects of the labour market at present is the high level of youth unemployment. Polices and strategies introduced by Governments to counteract the issue of youth unemployment have had a major effect on the development and transition to adulthood and employment of an increasing number of young people now deemed to be at risk.

This chapter focuses on the implications, arising from the implementation of these strategies, for young people reaching school leaving age (completion of Grade 10), particularly those in regional Australia. Consequences of these implications are discussed from the perspective of a study of regional Tasmanian youth, who are eligible to seek employment and enter the workforce and who do not choose to continue with a further two years at school.

Note: This chapter is from *Dead Centre: Regional Australia in Crisis*, edited by Ian Falk and to be published 1999.

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Youth unemployment: Is there a problem?

Work is a defining activity; we use it to talk about our present self and to indicate who we might want to be. At the same time work, itself, is being redefined in terms of when and where it is done, how it is done, and even what we mean by work (Matathia & Salzman, 1998). In this revolution we can see some of the forces in operation—globalisation, information and communications technology and so on—but we do not know what the world of work will look like in 10 or 20 years. The contours of the future nature of work are not fully clear but at present getting a job and earning a wage is still a very strong signal in indicating a transition from youth to adult and, importantly, from dependence to independence, in our society.

The importance of early work experience is recognised by Sweet (1998) who has described it as the major stepping stone to adult working life for the great majority of Australians since the end of the Second World War. Historically and traditionally, particularly in regional Australia, this notion of the individual moving from school to full-time work has been linked very closely to the notion of what it means to be an adult. It has been a kind of cultural necessity. However, now, in a situation where we have seen a predominantly male labour force be replaced by one in which women are rapidly approaching half of the total, and that same workforce move from manufacturing, skilled and manual occupations to service occupations, and where full-time work is no longer accepted as the norm, it is very difficult in some senses, for youth to have the same opportunities as earlier generations.

The nature of the problem

The changes to the nature of work outlined above – the move to more women joining the workplace, the shift from secondary to service industries, the casualisation of jobs and so on – can be seen to result in:

- a significant loss of employment opportunities for youth; and
- many full-time jobs gradually being replaced by part-time and casual work;
- young people leaving school at the completion of compulsory education being deemed 'at risk' in the transition to full adult status; and, if this is the case,
- of not gaining work; or
- of joining the increasing numbers of disadvantaged youth who find themselves unable to escape from the cycle of insecure, casual, temporary and part-time work (Wooden, 1998).

Government's actions

One consequence of broad government macro-economic policy, particularly the concern to curb inflation, has been the rise in youth unemployment. Marginson (1997) notes that during the period from 1966 to 1980, despite a significant increase in population, there was a decline in the full-time labour market for

teenagers, that is, those who typically would have left school as soon as they were able to and sought work. Since the 1970s the unemployment rate for this group has fluctuated around 20 per cent. Australia is not alone in confronting this issue; in the UK, for example, few young people enter the job market at 16 and 17 and upwards of one quarter of the population of working age are dependent on government assistance of one kind or another (Meadows et al., 1996).

Government's recognition of the youth employment issue has resulted in an array of long and short-term training and employment programs—the focus of which have changed over time. Recent studies both within Australia and overseas have looked at patterns and trends in employment program implementation and delivery. Withers and Batten's (1995) review, a broad examination of Canadian, UK and US literature, dealing with the problems of youth employment opportunities, reveals what they term an 'economic intention' underlying many of the education programs. That is, governments are deliberately linking educational and employment programs through statements about competencies rather than subject-matter content and so on. This link between education and employment is not unique to the English speaking countries. For example, the OECD (1996) report of several prominent European countries also underlines the economic orientation of their policies and practices.

Given the Australian tendency to 'policy borrow' or in broad terms to emulate what happens in the UK and, increasingly, the US it is not surprising to see the move to competencies, the vocationalising of secondary school curricula and that education and employment have become more closely integrated. At the present time, however, despite many attempts and efforts, including government labour market initiatives or youth development strategies, the challenge of youth unemployment has not been resolved (Carson & Daube, 1994).

Marginson (1997) argues that two broad strategies, to ameliorate these developments and the issue of youth unemployment, have been implemented by Australian federal governments since the 1980s. The first strategy involves changing the locus of government policy for the problem of youth unemployment. This is characterised by a shift in emphasis from the lack of jobs in the workplace to the individual's need to be 'job-ready' as a main determinant of employment. This emphasis, in broad terms, has shifted the onus of responsibility from government to the individual. Government and industry, are no longer cast in the position of being primarily responsible for the provision of jobs for youth or for job creation. The shift places the onus of responsibility on the individual to gain further education and to become employable in the new technological age. This focus upon the individual while ignoring the broader socio-politico-economic context is surprising given the central role this cluster of factors play in a modern society. Batten and Russell (1995), for example, contend; the Government's preoccupation with the individual while forgetting the structural causes of disadvantage such as unemployment, which leads to poverty, only tells half the story. Marginson

(1997) draws some of the threads in the government's approach to the youth unemployment problem in the following:

> Education programs were seen as the medium for changes in behaviour, and the means for shifting responsibility for job creation from government to the individual, using techniques of self-management and self improvement acquired in education. However, if education programs were to work in tandem with unemployment and labour market strategy, they had to be vocationalised (1997, p. 171).

The second strategy is a variant of the first. Here there is a similarity in the emphasis –focusing on the individual as a more highly skilled prospective worker – but the mechanism is different. It involves retention of young people in secondary school for two more years, which ensures that young people are better equipped to meet the challenge of the new employment opportunities while, at the same time, relieving the youth job market of many 15 to 18 year olds and the government of the embarrassing responsibility for an increasing number of unemployed youth and the cost of unemployment benefit. The emphasis is now squarely placed on youth and their lack of readiness for the workforce. The creation of labour market education programs and prolonged retention in schools has lead to prolonged dependence and delayed transition to what was formerly seen as full adult status within the society.

In adopting these two broad approaches Australia is following other developed countries down very similar youth employment/education pathways. However, without independently evaluating the policy directions and programs we are, unfortunately, experiencing the same conundrums and we are open to the same criticisms as those reported by the Youth Directorate of the Council of Europe (1998). The EU Council in their assessment of extending the length of time of compulsory education, introducing vocational work oriented programs, and ostensibly ensuring that the youth of the country do not suffer disadvantage, reported:

> ...It is unfortunate to note that young peoples' aspirations and expectations are often defined and managed by adults who have become experts in proposing strategies through which they can exclude young people from decision-making processes and social educational benefits while, at the same time, appearing to offer participation and acquisition at all levels on a silver plate (Council of Europe, 1998).

What are the possible implications of leaving school before Year 12 for regional youth?

It has been described above how the shift in government presentation in the 1980s of the issue of youth unemployment has moved from one of job availability to one of individual job readiness. At the same time there also has been a strong emphasis on transition education programmes in senior secondary schools. In this context what are the implications, particularly in regional areas, for early school leavers?

The emphasis and focus of the new strategies of inclusion and retention were initiated to ensure that the majority of young people, particularly those who do not wish to continue with higher education, are made ready for transition into

the workforce. The emphasis is on learning workplace generic skills and competences, through training programs and work related education programs, for entrance into the new sophisticated world of technologically assisted workplaces. Those young people who leave school at the completion of compulsory education, of whom regional Australia has a higher percentage (Lamb, 1997) than their urban peers, are at risk of exclusion and therefore of not fulfilling their aspirations and expectations.

Senior secondary schools as the focus for transition education

There are significant changes occurring in senior secondary schools, in terms of curricula, teaching approaches, methods of assessment and links with the world-of-work. However, the apparent emphasis on learning for work - in a narrow economic sense—and the explicit new role of the senior secondary schools to equip young people for transition to adulthood and employment is a fundamental shift in the way we traditionally have viewed the upper secondary years of schooling. The present focus on retention and vocational education in senior secondary schools, following policy changes at the state and federal level of government, means that young people who leave at the end of the compulsory education years receive minimal or no educational preparation for future work. It means that, in practice, they are left to establish their own transition pathways with little or no support. Many of these young people end up on the treadmill of casual, seasonal, part time, low paid employment and dead-end-jobs, interspersed with months or even years of unemployment. If there are no alternative pathways for them to re-enter training or education, they are the most vulnerable as they have no mechanisms by which to acquire the skills and vocational knowledge needed to enter worthwhile full-time positions.

The push for minimum relevant 'credentials'

Without formal post-school vocational training in place, as a mechanism for early school leavers to gain qualifications, they are further disadvantaged when competing with credentialled school leavers. The first recommendation of the Australian Education Council Review Committee's (1991) report established some minimum credentials as a means of joining the employment pathway. New formal qualifications, such as trainee certificates, were seen as instruments for access to the workforce and, it was envisaged, by the year 2001 almost all 20 year olds should have attained at least a higher level traineeship (Finn, 1991). Unless carefully monitored and supported by readily accessible pathways this initiative could further disempower young people who might be forced to leave school at the completion of compulsory education. In short, there needs to be proposed and implemented a national training requirement for 16- to 19-year-olds and support for small firms to improve their training programs.

A small percentage of young early school leavers, and those in regional areas to a greater degree than city youths, are more fortunate in gaining worthwhile employment. In the past, in many instances, this reflected the nature of

employment in the agricultural industry. This has changed significantly as we see the march of technology in agriculture and the resultant shedding of labour. However, there is a preference for early school leavers by regional employers in the trades areas as apprentices. The higher wage cost of employing older youths who have no more specific job related skills than a 16 year old, has, prohibited the older youths employment. This is changing, however, and the implementation of labour market programs, linked to senior secondary schools' education programs and traineeships, along with senior secondary education qualifications, present a persuasive incentive to employers to select the credentialled applicant. It needs to be ensured that the early school leaver who has work skills and knowledge which was developed through employment will not be devalued by certificated courses.

The Tasmanian study

A recent Tasmanian study of early school leavers (Williamson & Marsh, 1999) and their attempts to gain employment, highlights many of this chapter's earlier points relating, inter alia, to the emphasis on individual responsibility to be job ready, the needs of early school leavers, the consequences of exclusion from workplace knowledge and vocational education, and training at the critical juncture of transition. As respondents the youth were very aware of major disjunctions in their educational experience and the links it had with the world-of-work. Some of the particular issues they highlighted will be considered below.

Perceived problems with high school curriculum

All of the youth in the Tasmanian study (Williamson and Marsh, 1999), when reflecting on their high school educational careers, often after months of unsuccessful job seeking experience, reported on the inadequateness of what they did at school to prepare them for the pathway to the world-of-work. Table 1 presents some of these data. It is interesting to note that the large majority (N=63) reported negative comments about the five questions relating to the relevance of school subjects to assist them when they left school and tried to enter the workforce. The respondent's interviewed describe an initial but not strong understanding of the importance for good literacy and numeracy skills. They also describe that typically they did not perceive school as relevant and attuned to their aspirations and needs.

Table 1: Respondents' perceptions of appropriateness of school work and of work experience.

Responses	Relevance of subject	Interest in subject	Work information	Training information	Work experience	Total answers
Positive	7	7	2	3	14	33
Negative	12	12	18	15	6	63
Missing	1	1		2		4
						100

While the data show that negative responses to four of the five questions are often double the positive responses the question relating to work experience reverses the order. Here more respondents report they are positive about the work experience opportunity provided to them. However, the respondents also say that work experience was not helpful when they were seeking future employment because it typically was a one-week orientation into the workplace and this did not provide, in their view, an appropriate level of skill or experience. They also recounted that the emphasis in their schools was for further education in a senior secondary school and while information regarding the availability of education programs or TAFE courses abounded, information relating to assistance with joining the workforce was non-existent.

On the unemployment pathway

For the youth in this study the pathway to work is not easy. Since leaving school nearly a year ago many have begun to feel the restrictions that lack of money presents, namely: to adequately support job searching; boredom; and increasing community rejection. Many report negative experiences in their job searches, including: competition from a large number of others for the most menial of jobs; the sense of isolation and 'aloneness' after being rejected by employers, who in many instances, it was reported, provide no feedback on the reasons why they were unsuccessful. Increasingly they related experiencing a community view of them as failures. For many they saw themselves in a 'no-win' situation; they perceived pressure from the official welfare agencies and an insistence on them gaining work but with no assistance to help them. They described their experience with case management and job clubs in generally critical terms with phrases such as '...haven't we been through enough?'

However, not all attempts to assist them are perceived negatively, for example, when they take part in short training programs which have an emphasis on gaining generic skills and knowledge in specific areas of work, they at first, perceived this as returning to school with all its negative connotations. However, from a rejection phase they related a progressive change of perception along a pathway to acceptance and then enthusiasm for the programs. For many this culminated in an emerging excitement as they learned knowledge and skills they saw as relevant to the workplace. Many reported their confidence grew from the knowledge that they could become proficient in workplace skills and ultimately acquire a recognised certificate in an area of employment. Comments such as: 'Why couldn't they do this at school?'; and 'They treat you like adults here'; underlined their realisation that learning could be enjoyable and relevant to their personal goals and aspirations.

Individual credentialism: The key to the pathway?

For many of the youth their positive attitudes towards the programs they were completing were, at the same time, cause for some concern. Several spoke about the way the programs separated them from other youth who didn't have the opportunity, for whatever reason, to participate. Plus they saw they would

need to have a series of programs available if they were to be employable in jobs that were likely to change as described above. In a sense one can see they are beginning to reflect on and grapple with the enunciated approach that sees the individual having the responsibility for getting him/herself job ready.

Clearly in response to the question - what is the key to the pathway? for young people when they have left school; vocational training programs with no waiting period, provides the key. The Tasmanian study shows that with the emphasis in senior secondary schools for vocational education and training, workplace introductory programs and industry/education and training programs, leaving school early effectively precludes young people from gaining the knowledge and skills with which to make the transition from the world-of-school to the world-of-work. Carrying with it the connotations about adulthood and so on outlined earlier.

Implications for regional sustainability

As discussed earlier, the outcomes of early school leaving in regional Australia is more disadvantageous. With the technologisation of agricultural practices and the resultant redundancies of labour, permanent low skilled farm work no longer exists. Employment in the trades, traditionally apprenticeship based, also now tends toward older school leavers with relevant certificated skills. To gain these skills and have any chance of success in their future young people are forced to leave families and familiar environments, at an age when they need parental guidance and protection, and travel long distances to gain the necessary knowledge and skills to be able to compete for worthwhile full time employment. Therefore, young people growing up in regional communities are becoming increasingly more alienated from the broader community life and its support. This division also severs the community's links with its young emerging adult population creating further fragmentation to the structure of regional communities.

Conclusions

The Tasmanian study on which this chapter is based like many other studies (see for example, Batten and Russell, 1995; OECD, 1996; Marginson, 1997; Sweet, 1998), are suggesting that the issues of youth unemployment , how schools may forge more productive partnerships with business, the nature of relevant curricula, etc. needs to be revisited. The simplistic criticism of youth that they are responsible for all of the unemployment because they are not willing to work, etc. is not appropriate. A change in the understanding of the concepts of youth and education and community are needed. The Tasmanian study demonstrates the importance of the integration of community, employment and education agencies and the need for a more holistic approach to education for lifelong learning. Also support mechanisms for young people, not just through the transition from school to work phase, are required. Finally, while written in the context of the northern hemisphere the EU Council has

some appropriate thoughts on the broad picture, which is also applicable to Tasmania:

> The changing nature of modern youth has far-reaching implications for youth policies. Youth policies today can only be effective if they provide sustained support to individual development rather than seek to mould personalities; facilitate and inform individual choices rather than bluntly discipline; awake for (life-long) learning rather than impose standard knowledge in standard ways and then register educational and labour market failure... (Council of Europe, 1998)

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